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THE HASKALAH MOVEMENT

The Haskalah Movement in Russia. By JACOB S. RAISIN, Ph.D.,
D.D. Philadelphia: THE JEWISH PUBLICATION SOCIETY OF
AMERICA, 1914. 355 pp. and 6 photographic reproductions.

As time passes our generation is gradually shifted into a position from which it is enabled to obtain a perspective view of that commotion of the spirits which is generally denoted by the term Haskalah. The historic perspective thus gained co-ordinates the various phenomena of the past and establishes a scale by which to measure their relative importance. Seen through the prism of time many a colour vanishes, and shades hitherto ignored assume a bright hue; viewed through the distance of years the stormy waves produced among the Jews in Russia by the Haskalah movement are hardly more noticeable than a gentle swelling of the sea. Because like wave motion the Haskalah movement was a commotion of the surface only, the great masses of the Jewish people remained undisturbed. The instinctive feeling of the people, based as it was on centuries of bitter experience, could not see salvation in acquiring a veneer, not of real culture, but of the manners of their rulers and their oppressors, be they ever so polished. Not more was offered to it. Highly gifted individuals could and did acquire knowledge and culture at the expense of incredible efforts, but to the everyday man, to the great mass it merely meant the opportunity to be of the company of the minor officials who represented Russian authority in the provinces, and who mostly were grafters and drunkards. The Haskalah movement in Russia tended to the assimilation of the outer, the material, life of the Jews with that of the ruling race of Russia. It was not an assimilation of manners and habits as was brought about in the course of events in many lands under the pressure of economic necessity; it was an assimilation preached by doctrinaires. And the Jewish people, without philosophizing whether according to learned definition it was a race or a

nation, felt that the salvation offered portended danger to its existence as a group, and rejected it.

In his enthusiasm Dr. Raisin claims a much wider scope for the Haskalah movement than it, indeed, covered. Preaching in Russian in a synagogue as well as organizing a labour party are Haskalah to him. 'In its wide sense Haskalah denotes enlightenment', says the author. 'Those who strove to enlighten their benighted co-religionists or disseminate European culture among them, were called Maskilim.' This is not so. Neither the students who frequented the Universities nor the working men who organized the Arbeiterbund belonged to the Haskalah or held friendly feelings for it. The sway of the Haskalah movement was much narrower.

To assume that the Jewish people lived in 'the darkness of the Middle Ages' until the Haskalah taught it to appreciate Western culture is erroneous. The Jews possess too much common sense not to appreciate the economic value of mastering the language and conduct of the people surrounding them. The author's work itself contains many proofs of the general education and of the esteem in which the sciences were held by the more learned in Israel. Only in times of distress, when the waves of persecution threatened to swallow the entire Jewish people, its leaders built fences around it to save the weak and the straying. And as long as the surrounding culture was not of a higher grade than their own there was no necessity for the Jews to adopt it.

Essentially and mainly the Haskalah was a revolt against a sterile dogmatism in matters religious, and excessive traditionalism in matters of conduct. As such it naturally appealed to individuals and not to 'compact majorities'. It was a struggle for the personal freedom of the individual, and one can find in it a distant resemblance to the nihilism of those days in Russia. Yet it was a mild revolt. Attempts were made to explain forms and dogmas by rationalistic methods, which sometimes led to ludicrous results; minor matters of conduct were disregarded; a slight scepticism prevailed, but traditional Judaism faced no open revolt and the

maskilim, with few exceptions, attended the Bet ha-Midrash regularly three times daily. Most of its efforts the Haskalah spent in discussions and dissertations. Its great service was in preparing the minds for new forms of life.

The author gives an interesting and instructive review of the history of the Jews in Russia to the beginning of the last century, and traces the potent influence of Mendelssohn in Russian Jewry. He shows how under the influence of liberal ideas of Western Europe the leaders of all shades of Russian Jews acquired a more liberal view, and how the proselyting formally instituted by the Russian government succeeded in converting some prominent Jews and in estranging the Jewish people from all officialdom and its rich and influential Jewish friends. After the abortive attempts of Alexander I to convert the Jews by emoluments came the draconic laws of the corporal on the throne, Nicholas I, who tried to accomplish the same by force. Realizing after years of atrocities that even the 'slaughtering of the innocents' did not succeed, the Czar tried to re-educate the Jews by administrative procedure. Then the quixotic quest of Dr. Lilienthal took place. The gifted and popular preacher wished to believe in the good faith of the government, and could not see through its perfidy until it finally became clear to him that 'education without emancipation leads to conversion'. Dr. Lilienthal then left Russia, but the Jewish people remained behind for future persecutions. The author presents a picture of those times as well as of the reign of Alexander II. With the reign of the latter all real work of culture among the Jews began, because the government alleviated their burden. The Russian Jews quickly perceived the advantages of a worldly Russian education opened without condition, and flocked to it. Hopeful as were the liberal elements of Russia, were also the Jews; they both still believed in the possible goodwill of the autocracy. Great progress was made by the Jews in those times economically and intellectually, and when the inevitable reaction set in with Alexander III, in the eighties of the last century, it found a much-changed Jewish people.

The author denotes the end of the nineteenth century as the

'Awakening'. And, truly, an awakening it was for many stray sons of Israel, who believing themselves emancipated and true Russians awoke to realize their loneliness, and returned to their own people. Many, however, remained too contaminated to return to their own, too sick to enjoy among strangers.

Dr. Raisin has evidently put much labour in his work. His bibliography attached to the book covers the entire field of literature on the subject, and testifies to the author's zeal. To the latter may be ascribed a rather indiscriminate selection of authorities and quotation of names of scant importance. The poetic selections quoted in the book, one would believe, hardly do justice to the author's taste. On the whole the work will prove of great interest to those desirous of informing themselves on the history of the Jews in Russia. The book has a pleasant appearance and is well got up.

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